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# Linux opens door to low-cost, easy-to-use devices

## DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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We know the cost of computer technology has dropped precipitously over the past few decades. We hear this point made at conferences. Speakers observe that if cars had experienced the same technological progress as computers in the past two decades, they would travel thousands of kilometres on a litre of gas, boast 40,000 horsepower and cost less than $500.

But those who use personal computers know that if PC companies made cars, they'd blow up at least once a week, killing all occupants.

Reliability of operation hasn't been the forte of some of the products we use.

That quibble aside, expect the cost of hardware and software in the workplace to continue to slide. That trend is going to be accelerated with the emergence of Linux. You will soon see fascinating, low-cost devices that may become a key part of the office infrastructure.

One of them is NetWinder, a new product from Ottawa-based Rebel.com. The Corel spinoff has succeeded in putting together an inexpensive but powerful "office appliance" based on Linux.

Barely bigger than a coffee mug, the machine can be linked to your network to provide a range of capabilities, all simple to set up and use.

First, NetWinder offers a feature to establish both public and private discussion forums that people can access through a Web browser. The marketing folks want a place where they can have a continuing private discussion about a new product launch? No problem — set them up with identification and passwords, and they're in business in minutes.

Want to set up a Web-based support forum, through which customers can ask questions and research answers? No sooner said than done. Because it is built on Web technology, the forum can be made available internally or externally.

You may have a need for a centrally managed archive of documents, including Web pages, word processing text or spreadsheets, for use internally or externally. Simply use the InfoPlace program that Rebel.com has licensed from the company of the same name.

With this software, your staff or customers can easily browse documents by category, or undertake a key-word search looking for particular information.

You may also require a central network server for your Macintosh or Windows network for staff to share various documents and information. No problem — on your corporate local area network, the NetWinder looks exactly like a Windows or Macintosh file server.

If you want all staff members to have their own Web site for internal use, it has tools for that, too. And if you use NetWinder in a home office or small office setting, it will act as your corporate gateway to the Internet, allowing everyone to share access through a single connection.

It can also serve your external Web site, and provide protection against unauthorized access to your corporate network through sophisticated firewall software. It can give you a server that easily transmits computer files, images or other documents. It also can be your corporate E-mail system.

You could do all this with a basic Pentium computer and a free copy of Linux, or go out and buy a far more expensive Windows NT or Macintosh file server and all the associated software.

Rebel.com has made it simple to set up, implement and make available all of these capabilities. The price starts at $1,450 for a basic unit, and goes up from there with more storage and memory.

NetWinder is just the first in a coming flood of low-cost, easy-to-use devices that will provide us all kinds of new office capabilities.

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